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# NOT SO COVERT AID

## Advertising doesn't mix with secret operations

By Allan E. Goodman

Washington

**O**n Feb. 26, many newspapers published a picture of the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, and other key White House officials looking on as President Reagan signed a message to Congress requesting authorization to use \$100 million of Defense Department funds for a covert action. The president wants the money to buy arms and material for the rebel forces fighting to overthrow the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. As part of his campaign to convince a skeptical Congress to release the funds, Mr. Reagan received rebel leaders in the Oval Office, and a private group, the National Endowment for the Preservation of Liberty, plans to spend more than \$1 million for television advertising to support the "contras."

Such publicity about covert action would have been considered a serious breach of security, a national scandal, as recently as a decade ago.

From 1947, when the Central Intelligence Agency was created, to the mid-1970s, covert action was a tightly held state secret, authorized by a handful of officials operating in back rooms at the White House and the CIA, through a process that concealed the president's involvement. But in the United States today, covert action is neither very covert nor something that the president or the government as a whole can plausibly deny. By law, the president must personally issue a finding that each covert action is in the national interest, and so notify Congress.

When President Reagan reorganized the U.S. intelligence community in 1981 and issued the executive order which now governs its activities, covert action was defined as activities conducted in support of national foreign policy objectives abroad which are planned and executed so that the role of the U.S. government is not apparent or acknowledged publicly.

In 1985, however, the concern with whether the hand of the United States should be concealed began to disappear. In President Reagan's State of the Union message that year, he called for support of "freedom fighters" defying Soviet-supported aggression. Shortly thereafter, senior administration spokesmen called openly for covert military and economic aid to anti-communist guerrillas in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola and Cambodia. Such aid is seen by the administration as an essential ingredi-

ent of a strategy to combat aggression and to counter the activities of such states as Nicaragua, Cuba, Libya and Iran, which export revolution and subversion.

As Secretary of State George P. Shultz argued in a speech last December, effective resistance to Soviet influence sometimes requires that the U.S. government help freedom fighters without open acknowledgment. But the administration has grown increasingly open about its willingness to finance covert action and the propriety of doing so.

Overt covert action, however, is self-defeating. Effective covert action really does require concealing American involvement and support.

Secrecy is vital for two reasons. First, it protects the U.S. government if the covert action should fail. Second, it protects the recipients of the aid from the charge that they are merely puppets of a foreign power and, thereby, are as illegitimate as the alleged puppet governments or dictators they are seeking to overthrow.

Consider, for example, what would have happened if the new president of the Philippines, Corazon C. Aquino, had been a recipient of U.S. covert aid and this had somehow become public. If the leak had occurred before the Filipino election, Mrs. Aquino might have been discredited as a candidate, and American interests might have become even more vulnerable to pressure from supporters of Ferdinand E. Marcos, who would have been outraged. If such covert aid had been revealed after her victory, she would almost certainly be compelled now to act more coolly toward the United States to prove the legitimacy of her government and her own independence.

By going public on many of its covert action programs, the Reagan administration tarnishes the American image abroad and weakens the public appeal of those it supports who — unlike the "contras," who have engaged in grizzly reprisals against their prisoners and civilians — may be admirable freedom fighters.

Many intelligence professionals disagree with both the present cavalier attitude toward revealing covert action and the extent to which the administration has turned to such activity to bolster its foreign policy objectives. When Adm. Stansfield Turner became director of central intelligence in 1977, he found "the majority of espionage professionals... believed that covert action had brought more harm and criticism to the CIA than useful return."

Most professionals contend that covert action is a risky weapon and should be considered only when all other options have been exhausted. "But the trouble with Reagan and [CIA Director William J. Casey], one told me in an interview, 'is that they look at covert action as just another option. It's on the table from the beginning. And the

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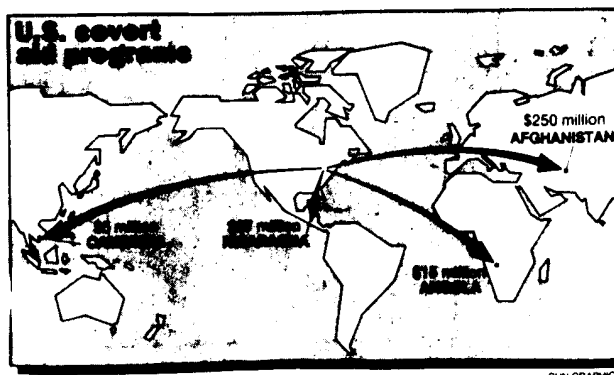
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trouble with covert action is that it is too easy to use when diplomacy seems to be frustrating or too time-consuming.”

Other intelligence officers argue, in fact, that whenever the government's hand in an international move can be revealed or acknowledged, open or diplomatic channels are appropriate and much to be preferred.

Under President Reagan, nevertheless, the number of covert operations has increased substantially since the Carter administration — to more than 50. Aside from support of freedom fighters, the Reagan administration is supporting such covert operations as those aimed at overthrowing the regime of Col. Muammar el Kaddafi of Libya, channeling money to pro-American political parties in Latin American and African countries, and backing paramilitary operations aimed at preventing and countering terrorism.

Most of these operations were requested by policy-makers at the State Department or in the White House; intelligence professionals today remain very gun-shy about proposing covert operations, and are reluctant to risk their careers to carry them out. As a result, much of the work of covert action is done by contract employees who usually do not end up as career officers in the CIA.



My own view is that the United States should get out of the business of covert action altogether. It is anachronistic and impractical in an era when intelligence agencies no longer appear able — and the president seems disinclined — to maintain the level of secrecy required to keep these operations from coming to public light. In addition, I do not think that the extent to which the president and the White House have become enthusiastically and deeply involved in the process of deciding on and authorizing covert actions enhances the image of the chief executive.

Covert action is always a risky course. Most congressional leaders say the administration has yet to make a compelling case for it in Nicaragua. More important, the president has yet to prove in this instance that when he asks for money for covert action, the normal tools and channels of conducting foreign policy and influencing other countries have been fully and sincerely explored.

Mr. Goodman, associate dean at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, is a former official of the Central Intelligence Agency.